

Testimony of

Dr. James Earl Kennamer
Senior Vice President Conservation Programs
The National Wild Turkey Federation



Review of

**The Workings of Current
Agricultural Conservation Programs**

**Before The
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Chambliss, Ranking Member Harkin and Members of the Committee. I am Dr. James Earl Kennamer, the Senior Vice President for Conservation Programs for the National Wild Turkey Federation. I am a professional wildlife biologist with expertise managing wild turkeys and other wildlife on both public and private lands in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. I have worked for the National Wild Turkey Federation since 1980 and for the decade before that as an associate professor for wildlife biology at Auburn University.

The National Wild Turkey Federation is dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of the hunting tradition. When the National Wild Turkey Federation was founded in 1973, there were only 1.3 million wild turkeys throughout North America. Since then, the number of wild turkeys has increased to nearly 7 million birds thanks to state, federal and provincial wildlife agencies, the NWTF, its members and partners.

Growth and progress define the NWTF as it has expanded from 1,300 members in 1973 to more than 500,000 today with 2,200 in all 50 states, Canada, Mexico and 14 other foreign countries. With that growth has come impressive strides in wildlife management as the NWTF has forged dynamic partnerships across the country. Together, the NWTF's conservation partners and grassroots members have raised and spent more than \$224 million on conservation projects. This investment has helped conserve and improve more than 9.6 million acres of wildlife habitat and uphold hunting traditions.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee today to present the NWTF's views on our current agricultural conservation programs, and to share ideas for improving them.

Conservation Programs are Working

I am happy to report that our federal agricultural conservation programs work well. Together, we are putting conservation on the ground, helping landowners and producers as well as our communities, land and wildlife. We have invested wisely in our children's future.

It is important to understand that today's positive state of affairs with our agricultural conservation programs has been an evolution. We have had some setbacks. But the fact is we have expanded agricultural policy beyond production and food safety to include public benefits such as wildlife, water, and soil conservation. These programs which leaders like you have created will continue to improve as we find better ways to conserve soil, water, air and wildlife while enhancing the lives of farmers and forest landowners.

The federal agencies charged with delivering these programs continue to find better ways to get the job done. We recognize the success of agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, state wildlife and forestry agencies,

Conservation Districts, and a multitude of non-governmental organizations. We may not always agree, but we believe the success of many of our federal conservation programs has been a result of this team effort.

The NWTF strongly believes that a robust conservation policy carried out through agricultural conservation programs can improve the nation's soil, water, air, wildlife and economy. These positive impacts can be made largely within the conservation programs currently authorized and administered under the 2002 Farm Bill. However, these programs must be funded as authorized, and we have to do a better job of involving third party technical service providers.

Together, the Farm Bill's core conservation programs, EQIP, CRP, WHIP, WRP, FLEP and the Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) seek to encourage agricultural producers and landowners to better manage their land with a conservation ethic in mind. The NWTF strongly supports these goals and the conservation programs that seek to achieve it.

Today, I would like to share with you our observations on several conservation programs and provide recommendations for improvement.

Healthy Forests (FLEP and FSP)

Maintaining forestland is a major challenge because it continues to be driven by economic value, causing many forests to be converted to housing developments. By improving the quality of our forests for the benefit of wildlife and landowners, we can work to keep our forests intact. Our nation's forests supply more than 50 percent of freshwater flow to the lower 48 states. An estimated 180 million people depend on forests for their drinking water. Unfortunately, more than 44.2 million acres of private forest are likely to be lost to housing development in the next three decades. If so, these acres will no longer be providing the same benefits to clean water, air, forest products, and wildlife habitat.¹ The facts are clear, if a landowner can't make a profit off their land, they will usually sell it when the price is right. The best tool we have to at least slow the process of forest fragmentation is to provide effective technical assistance to forest landowners and incentives to practice good conservation.

Technical assistance and cost-share programs are critical for several reasons. First, technical assistance provides the information landowners need to improve the profitability and ecological function of their forest. Because most landowners are not trained as natural resource managers, they often lack the knowledge of active forest management, which is necessary to achieve their goals. A vast amount of heavy science has been completed, and we generally know what works. In addition, we have 33 NWTF wildlife biologists on staff implementing good conservation practices in every state. The best tools to actively manage a forest include timely tree harvest, thinning stands,

¹ Stein, S.M., R.E. McRoberts, R.J. Alig, M.D. Nelson, D.M. Theobald, M.E. Eley, M. Dechter and M. Carr. 2005. Forests on the Edge, Housing development on America's Private Forests. USDA Forest Service, General Technical Report PNW-GTR-636

prescribed fire and removal of invasive plant species, just to name a few techniques. For example, many species of currently declining wildlife are species that need varying age classes of timber.² Bobwhite quail, ruffed grouse, and the golden-winged warbler are several examples of species declining because active forest management is not widely practiced. Wild turkeys need a variety of forest stand ages to meet their annual needs for food and nesting cover. Although the wild turkey needs some older-growth forest, clear cuts and thinned timber stands are necessary as well.

The Forest Stewardship Program (FSP), administered by the USDA Forest Service State and Private Forestry, is one of the best programs ever developed to help private forest landowners. Through this program, natural resource professionals have written more than 260,000 forest management plans improving almost 30 million acres of land. Because the state forestry agencies, in collaboration with other state and federal agencies, deliver this program, the FSP provides outstanding technical assistance to our nation's forest landowners. However, the program does not provide cost share assistance to landowners; therefore it falls short of what it could accomplish. It is imperative that we allow for cost-share funding for forest landowners so we can teach them how to actively manage their forests for wildlife, and long-term economic viability.

Providing technical and cost-share assistance is a financial investment that returns revenue to our communities and state and federal governments. By producing healthier, sustainable forests, state and local governments benefit from more forest-related jobs and increases in tax revenue. The NWTf strongly urges your continued support of the Forest Stewardship Program.

Perhaps our greatest issue regarding forestry conservation programs is with the Forest Land Enhancement Program. The Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP) is a well-intentioned program this Committee authorized and funded, yet FLEP has had its authorized funding diverted to other uses despite full Farm Bill authorization and strong support. As we stated earlier, cost share programs for forest landowners are critical. Most landowners would do more conservation practices if they had cost-share funding.³ Without substantial and consistent funding, future efforts to improve forest management on private lands through this and other programs will suffer. To improve forest management, we support full funding of the FLEP as approved by Congress, plus continued funding at no less than current levels to reach the goals of the program.

Forests and Working Lands Programs (CRP, EQIP, WHIP, WRP)

Even incidental woodlands associated with agricultural operations can provide valuable wildlife habitat when actively managed. The wild turkey and bobwhite quail are two popular game species that significantly benefit from agricultural practices, especially

² Hunter, W.C., D.A. Buehler, R.A. Canterbury, J.L. Confer, and P.B Hamel. Conservation of disturbance-dependent birds in eastern North America. Wildlife Society Bulletin 2001, 29:440-455.

³ J.D. Esseks and R.J. Moulton. 2000. Evaluation the Forest Stewardship Program through a National Survey of Participating Forest Land Owners. Center for Governmental Studies, Northern Illinois University.

when actively managed forests are available. In addition, the wildlife benefits of many conservation practices offered through the Farm Bill could be improved with more attention towards forest management. Specifically:

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals, and optimizes environmental benefits. EQIP provides cost-share payments and other incentive payments to producers to address soil, water and related natural resource concerns. Although half of the EQIP funding is directed to agricultural waste management, landowners have successfully used this program to cost-share activities such as prescribed fire, invasive species management, planting wildlife openings, and timber stand improvement practices.

The NWTF strongly supports the goals of EQIP. Agricultural production done right is compatible with environmental quality. EQIP has enhanced biodiversity. However, approximately one percent of EQIP funds are spent on forest management, and only about five percent of funds are for wildlife. Overall, this \$1.1 billion dollar program in 2006 spends less than \$10 million annually in forestry cost-share assistance to landowners.

In addition, there is a need for more cost-share and technical assistance to private landowners. The types of practices needed differ according to region. In the Southeast, thinning, prescribed fire and control of mid-story hardwoods are needed. The Northeast requires improving timber stands, managing spring seeps, and establishing more diverse stands of timber.

The NWTF recommends strengthening the regulations and underlying law to implement EQIP to ensure more funds are targeted to wildlife activities that improve the biodiversity and health of our forests. In addition, we believe an increase in funding will further enhance opportunities to improve wildlife habitat, including forests. Finally, we believe that EQIP should require more contribution agreements to allow NGOs to assist private landowners without going through the cumbersome technical service provider process.

Another area of improvement we recommend, especially in EQIP and WHIP, is matching the appropriate technical assistance (TA) professionals to the job at hand. For example, a forester or wildlife professional with the appropriate training should be consulted when developing EQIP contracts on forestland or when the practice targets wildlife habitat. More appropriate technical assistance can be accomplished by continued partnering with state wildlife and forestry agencies, and non-governmental organizations.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has an excellent long-term track record for providing landscape-level conservation of soil, water and wildlife habitat throughout the country, especially since signup number twenty, when significant wildlife benefits were added. In addition to serving its initial objective to conserve soils on highly erodible lands, the CRP provides significant wildlife habitat, especially for many grassland species. This voluntary program is popular with landowners.

Future funding of this program is critical, not only for protecting soil and water, but for wildlife as well. However, to further this mission, additional incentives such as higher rental payments, extended contracts, and improved mid-contract management are necessary. The NWTF recommends a minimum continued CRP enrollment of 39.2 million acres, at 2002 Farm Bill levels.

The NWTF also supports continued refinement of the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) to further produce high quality wildlife habitats. In addition, the NWTF suggests encouraging wildlife-friendly plantings on CRP land such as hardwoods, longleaf pines, native grasses and forbs. On-the-ground application of certain practices should be improved to better address wildlife habitat. For example, many seeding rates for native warm season grasses are too high to adequately address one of the program's national priorities of promoting at-risk wildlife habitat. In this example, seeding rates are more aligned with grazing priorities than providing cover for wildlife.

We support re-enrollment of loblolly pine CRP contracts in the Southeast, but we recommend limiting compensation to mid-contract cost-share maintenance for wildlife habitat. These existing loblolly pine stands offer minimal wildlife benefit if unmanaged and the likelihood of these plantations being removed and planted back to row crops is unlikely. As such, enrolling large acreages of loblolly pines into CRP comes at the expense of hardwoods or longleaf pine acres that will likely provide more long-term, diverse wildlife habitat.

We support providing higher incentive payments and longer-term contracts for landowners willing to plant hardwoods and/or longleaf pine where appropriate. These species offer significant environmental and public benefits over other species such as loblolly pine. We also would remove restrictions on Continuous CRP which prevent incidental grazing around harvested cropland. This current restriction is a significant obstacle to many landowners due to required fencing under the current regulations.

Finally, and we understand this is sensitive, we would urge the Congress to provide enough funding for FSA to have full time employees to manage compliance of these contracts. The agency is doing about as good as they can with the constraints placed on them by OMB. However, most of the concerns we have about CRP could be addressed by having ample numbers of qualified wildlife science professionals to ensure producers are in compliance. This would avoid the bad ecological mistakes like broadcasting herbicides over entire plots of mostly native grasses to control isolated cases of invasive plants. Broadcasting kills the invasive species and the beneficial native ones as well. Mr. Chairman, we can't use only technology to accomplish this kind of oversight. It requires a well trained professional who builds a relationship with a grower and gets the job done right. In the end, everything we do is really about people. We must work one-on-one with landowners to be successful.

The **Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program** (WHIP) has provided significant benefits to both agricultural producers and wildlife. The NWTF supports an increased emphasis in WHIP toward managing native plant communities and increasing biodiversity. Currently, states often target WHIP funding to benefit one or two species of concern, such as bobwhite quail and the American woodcock. However, we recommend that WHIP broaden the number of targeted species and place more focus on the long-term benefits of a practice (such as prescribed burning or targeted mast producing oak planting).

Previously, WHIP has seen dramatic cuts in the amount of funding that is ultimately appropriated. From 2005 through 2007, WHIP was approved at \$85 million annually. However, only \$45 million was provided. NWTF supports funding for WHIP at \$85 million annually.

The **Wetlands Reserve Program** was designed to restore wetlands in cropland areas and develop habitat for wetland-associated wildlife, especially threatened and endangered species. WRP provides suitable habitat for many species of wildlife, especially since the program includes management on upland areas in addition to wetland areas. WRP was authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill to enroll up to 3.275 million acres. Lands are enrolled through the use of permanent and 30-year easements, restoration cost-share agreements, or some combination. We feel this is an effective program that benefits the resource and is popular with landowners. NWTF strongly supports continued funding for WRP and recommends that the Congress maintain and fully fund the annual enrollment of 250,000 acres.

Building Public Support for Conservation and Farm Programs

Public Access/Hunter Access: Hunting is an American tradition with nearly 18.5 participants that annually contribute over \$30 billion annually to our economy. Opportunities for public access to hunt private land are an economic benefit to local communities, the hunting industry, and the general public as a whole. .

To increase the benefit of agriculture conservation programs to all citizens, we support adding additional points to the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) for landowners that open their land to public hunting. If two properties rank equally, the landowner willing to open their land to public access should have preference for funding eligibility.

The NWTF supports providing incentives to open private lands to hunters, anglers and trappers. These incentives could be provided through additional points or direct incentive payments given to landowners who open their land. NWTF supports private property rights and would never support forcing landowners to void those rights, but many landowners are willing to provide access to sportsman. Incentives or rewards should be provided for the benefit of more access to green space while broadening support for farm and conservation programs.

CONCLUSION:

In summary, Mr. Chairman, the NWTF believes that our agricultural conservation programs protected and enhanced wildlife habitat, while providing other conservation, hunting, and recreation benefits.

With some moderate administrative and statutory adjustments, and improved mechanisms to protect the funding promised for conservation, NWTF is confident these programs can provide even greater future benefits to wildlife, people, and the economy. Please know that NWTF stands ready to work with you to craft these adjustments over the months to come, and to invest our own funding and sweat equity into these conservation efforts.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share our comments with you today.

I will be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.

National Wild Turkey Federation's Partnerships to Help Private Landowners *A Few Recent Success Stories*

Operation Oak

A partnership project between the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the NWTF

- Since 2000, over 150,000 seedlings were planted for wildlife impacting 240,000 acres of private and public land across the Southeast.
- In 2005, the NWTF's Operation Oak program planted 44,000 oak seedlings across the Southeast impacting over 70,000 acres.
- In 2006, the program planted 66,000 oak seedlings on 105,000 acres.



Indian Creek Wildlife Habitat Restoration Initiative, South Carolina

This landscape-level project impacts over 16,000 acres of private and public lands to improve forest health and wildlife habitat for species that depend on grasslands and similar habitats and to benefit local landowners.

- Project partners include: USDA Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, South Carolina Forestry Commission, Clemson Cooperative Extension Service, Quail Unlimited, East Piedmont Resource Conservation, Plum Creek and Development Council and private landowners.



Illinois Wildlife Habitat Education Program



A partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to educate landowners about wildlife management techniques they can use on their property, to develop whole-farm resource plans, and to assist the NRCS with WHIP enrollment.

- In 2005, 12 statewide field days were conducted reaching over 600 landowners and 40 detailed management plans were written.
- This year, 4 demonstration farms are being selected to showcase wildlife management techniques, and 110 whole-farm resource plans are being written for private landowners.

National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD)

Conservation Districts and the NWTF are pooling efforts to educate landowners about Farm Bill programs through field days, associated publications and media outlets, and individual projects at state and local levels. Some examples of current projects include:

- Funded temporary technician to enroll and monitor 4,000 acres of CRP and CSP lands in Missouri allowing NRCS and FSA employees to concentrate on writing conservation plans for CSP/CRP and reduce backlog in other Farm Bill program participation such as WHIP and EQIP.
- Purchased equipment for use by Conservation District and private landowners and developed an educational arboretum at a local school, all to improve or create wildlife habitat on private lands and educate the public about conservation in Missouri, Pennsylvania and Minnesota.
- Cooperatively conducted a field day in Tennessee for 250 landowners demonstrating forest stand management, eradication of invasive plant species and the restoration and maintenance of native warm season grasses through prescribed burning on a local working farm.

Hunting Heritage Club

An outreach effort to assist landowners and farmers in managing their land for wildlife. Currently, there are over 50,000 members in this new program. The program offers a magazine, *Get in the Game*, which is a counterpart to the NWTF's highest rated television show, also by the same name, airing on the Outdoor Channel. The Hunting Heritage program also offers landowner field days throughout the country.



We have recently partnered with the Georgia and South Carolina Forestry commissions, Georgia Pacific, Mead/Westvaco and Weyerhaeuser Company to distribute the *Get in the Game* magazine to forest landowners and hunters.

State Forestry Partnership/Forest Stewardship

- Currently, NWTF has a partnership with the Georgia Forestry Commission and the NRCS providing NWTF wildlife biologists to help landowners develop resource management plans and enroll eligible landowners in the WHIP and EQIP programs.
- Current partnerships with Georgia and South Carolina State Forestry include a newsletter in the NWTF *Get in the Game* magazine highlighting Forest Stewardship that will result in increased Farm Bill program participation.

